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The CIA and the press

Last week's discussion of the sore subject of the recruitment of journalists (and other professionals) as CIA agents between Adm. Stansfield Turner and newspaper editors attending their yearly convention in Washington turned out badly from every point of view. The CIA director and the editors found little or no common ground.

The clashing interests may be irreconcilable. But Admiral Turner seemed at best grossly insensitive to press concerns. While blandly acknowledging that journalism, religion and academia "have a special importance," he nonetheless "recognized" (*recognized?*) that in "unusual circumstances" an individual from a news-gathering organization "may be used as an agent." To the consternation of his audience, he disclosed his approval of plans to use journalists in Agency work in three recent instances. For reasons he did not explain, the plans were never carried out.

The editors, for their part, clung tenaciously to the view that there should be no CIA use of journalists, and were, until informed to the contrary by Admiral Turner, under the impression that was the Agency's publicly declared policy. It was, at least, the policy stated by the Admiral's predecessor, William Colby.

The editors who most vehemently challenged Admiral Turner's views take the position that any use of a foreign correspondent as a CIA agent contaminates all correspondents, enlarging the suspicion of their activities in the countries where they are assigned to report. "You have," as the executive editor of *The New York Times* told Admiral Turner, "cast doubt on the ethical position of every American correspondent abroad."

The admiral said he didn't understand. Why, he asked, would it make the press any less "free" to accept an occasional assignment from him?

The answer to that question is that it probably wouldn't. The integrity and safety, not the freedom, of correspondents are what editors worry about. But defining what's at stake only carries us to the threshold of a complex issue. It probably isn't realistic to expect a CIA director categorically to rule out any source of agents. But Admiral Turner chose to be needlessly blunt about a matter that he could have finessed.

Surely, the *general* rule ought to be what the self-declared rule of the CIA has been in the recent past — that it does not recruit journalists, clergymen and academics as agents. One can imagine circumstances in which exceptions might be tempting. As we observed in this space some weeks ago, "it would be difficult to object if some undercover agent, posing as a clergyman, had been admitted to the U.S. embassy in Tehran . . . and had stumbled upon intelligence making it possible to secure the release of the American hostages there. Which is only to say the obvious — that emergencies tend to write their own codes of law and ethics."

Newspapers, moreover, are not resourceless. They can fire any correspondent discovered to be acting for the CIA on grounds of clear conflict of interest. That self-policing sanction would probably suffice to minimize the problem, if not eliminate it. But it would be an added measure of reassurance to those who report abroad if Admiral Turner were to restate the policy that his agency does not recruit reporters.

But this, above all, is not an issue that can be usefully discussed in abstract and theoretical terms. The main point, perhaps, is that Admiral Turner ought to stick to the wise policy of his predecessor, Mr. Colby, and — apart from describing general rules — keep his recruiting policies to himself. He should not discuss cases that are pointlessly provocative.